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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 CHIANG MAI 000029

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DEPARTMENT FOR EAP/MLS, DRL AND IO
PACOM FOR FPA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 2/21/2018
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [MOPS](#) [PHUM](#) [BM](#) [TH](#)
SUBJECT: SPDC BLAMED FOR KNU ASSASSINATION AS TENSIONS RISE

REF: CHIANG MAI 27

CHIANG MAI 00000029 001.2 OF 003

CLASSIFIED BY: Alex Barrasso, Chief, Pol/Econ, CG Chiang Mai.
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

Summary

1. (C) An increasing number of interlocutors are blaming the Burmese regime for the February 14 assassination of Karen National Union Secretary General Mahn Sha. Thai officials' investigation has turned up a regime connection to the killing, as well as a private Thai link to the plot and photos of the alleged gunmen, who belong to the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA). Press reports of a cross-border attack from Burma into Thailand appear to be false, as do those of two suspected gunmen having been arrested in possession of AK-47s. Meanwhile, Burmese have closed various piers along the Moei River and beefed up security on the Burmese side of the bridge connecting Karen State with Tak Province, probably as a precaution against possible retaliatory action by Thai-based KNU forces. End Summary.

----- Multiple Actors In A Complex Plot -----

2. (C) As reported in Reftel, Mahn Sha, General Secretary of the Karen National Union (KNU), was gunned down in northern Thailand on February 14. (Note: The KNU has waged low-level military conflict against the Burmese regime for over 40 years, but poses no real threat to it. The group currently limits its actions to

protecting civilians in Karen State from the Burma Army's abuses, and attacking small groups of Burma Army soldiers when it can.)

13. (C) Though hot debate continues over exactly who carried out/ordered the assassination, an increasing number of fingers are being pointed at the Burmese regime. KNU contacts told us today they intercepted radio communications between a former KNU member now cooperating with two KNU splinter groups -- the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) and KNU Peace Council (KPC) -- and Lieutenant Colonel Myat Htun Oo of Burma's Office of Military Affairs Security. (Note: The DKBA is a KNU splinter group that now sides with the Burmese regime and provides military support to it. The KPC also split from the KNU, and signed a peace agreement with the regime in 2006). According to the KNU, just 90 minutes after Mahn Sha's death, the former KNU member reportedly told Myat Htun Oo that the mission had been accomplished. This is consistent with press reports that also make reference to this radio intercept, as well as with information obtained from local Thai intelligence officials, who cited their Burmese counterparts in Myawaddy as the source of the information.

14. (C) According to Thai National Intelligence Agency (NIA) contacts, Thai police have located the vehicle the assailants used to flee the crime scene. It is registered to a Thai businessman who is involved in the DKBA's illegal timber trade. NIA and Royal Thai Army (RTA) contacts also told us the plot was funded by the KPC. They also said they have photos of the two gunmen, who are DKBA members, and who have since returned to Myawaddy. These claims are consistent with the KNU's assessment that the gunmen could not have carried out the attack without help from someone in Thailand, and that the regime could have paid a handsome sum for that collaboration. Though KNU contacts told us they are not planning any retaliatory action at this time, NIA and RTA interlocutors believe there is a high possibility of increased personalized, retaliatory violence.

CHIANG MAI 00000029 002.2 OF 003

KNU contacts said that if such violence continues, they believe some of their members and offices will soon be targeted.

15. (C) Comment: Though Mahn Sha's assassination appears not to have been carried out in direct retaliation for the earlier assassination of KPC General Ler Mu (see Reftel), NIA contacts told us Ler Mu's murder created the perfect excuse for the regime to kill Mahn Sha. Ler Mu's death made retaliatory action on the part of the KPC/DKBA very plausible. The NIA officials said they have known about a planned plot to kill Mahn Sha for about a year now, but they opined that Ler Mu's death gave the regime a perfect excuse to carry it out. A KNU contact told us he could not confirm that exiles outside the KNU were in danger as a result of Mahn Sha's assassination, saying he thought that was just "speculation." End Comment.

Separating Fact From Fiction

16. (SBU) In the aftermath of the assassination, there have been several press reports on various aspects that have proven to be inaccurate. On February 14, the Thai Government Public Relations Department reported that DKBA troops had carried out a cross-border attack against the KNU into Tak Province. Both KNU and local Thai contacts have confirmed to us repeatedly that this report is not true. Separately, exiles and some media outlets reported that two men were arrested in Mae Sot in close proximity to the offices of a Burmese exile group while in possession of AK-47s. This too, is a fabrication, according to Thai officials. Some Burmese migrant workers carrying pistols were arrested, they said, but those workers are not connected to Mahn Sha's assassination. Lastly, February 20 press reports, including one in the exile publication Irrawaddy, state that Thai officials have closed some official border checkpoints. What we learned today from our contacts is that piers along the Moei River controlled by the DKBA have been closed in advance of

the February 21 Bilateral Township Border Committee meeting, which is taking place in Myawaddy. They also told us that that contrary to reports from some Burmese exiles, the Friendship Bridge linking Myawaddy in Karen State to Mae Sot in Thailand remains open, though security on the Burmese side has been increased. They believe this step was taken to prevent any cross-border violence from disrupting the gathering.

Comment

17. (C) Mahn Sha's assassination brings nothing but benefits for the Burmese regime: a strong unifying force in the Burmese exile community is now dead, with no apparent heir waiting in the wings; the rift between the KNU on one side, and the KPC/DKBA on the other, will only widen; and the regime can plausibly blame the assassination on infighting between Karen groups. Mahn Sha's death can also only weaken what was already a depleted Karen resistance movement. Separately, we do not expect the investigation into the assassination to yield results. From their perspective, the Thai are unlikely to request that the Burmese hand over the gunmen, because this would amount to a public acknowledgement that the Thai allows the KNU to operate on its territory. For their part, the Burmese would not hand them over, because they do not want to be seen as betraying those who carry out what they see as good deeds. Furthermore, though Thai police are pressuring the Thai businessman who owns the get-away vehicle for information, he is unlikely to provide any to avoid jeopardizing his illegal timber business, which he runs in cahoots with the DKBA.

18. (C) If the Burmese regime did indeed sanction the killing, we wonder if the timing was determined in part by a calculation by

CHIANG MAI 00000029 003.2 OF 003

the Burmese that the new government in Bangkok is less sensitive to such actions than the interim government would have been. Many observers saw the Thaksin administration as accommodative to the Burmese junta's interests. It remains unclear to us whether Samak's Burma policy will emulate Thaksin's, but a Burmese decision to carry out this operation in Thai territory might indicate that the Burmese believe Samak is willing to let them get away with murder.

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